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Equine welfare assessment: An exploration of British stakeholder attitudes using focus group discussions

Abstract

The equine industry in Great Britain (GB) has not been subject to the same pressures as the farming industry to engage with welfare assessment but this may change as concern about equine welfare increases. Stakeholder perceptions of, and attitudes towards, welfare assessment may impact on the implementation of welfare assessment practices. Focus group discussions regarding the development of a welfare assessment tool were conducted with six equine stakeholder groups: leisure horse owners (n=4), grooms (n=5), veterinary surgeons (n=3), welfare scientists n=4), welfare charity workers (n=5) and professional riders (n=4). Three themes emerged from the discussions: 1) participants predominantly interpreted welfare assessment as a means of identifying and correcting poor welfare in an immediate way; 2) participants believed that horse welfare varied over time; and 3) attributes of the assessor were viewed as an important consideration for equine welfare assessment. The views of equine industry members give insight into the value welfare assessments may have to the industry and how equine welfare assessment approaches can achieve credibility within the industry and increase the positive impact that welfare assessments can have on equine welfare.

Keywords: attitudes; focus group; horse; stakeholder; welfare assessment

Introduction

Animal welfare assessment is vital for welfare improvement in all animal species as it allows for the identification of problems and associated risk factors (Whay, 2007). In Great Britain (GB) assessment of the welfare of horses currently only occurs in limited circumstances, for example the licensing of riding schools (Gov.UK, 2015). In contrast, pressure from consumers has resulted in substantial investment in the development of welfare assessment tools for use on farms which are now an integral part of food assurance schemes such as The Red Tractor scheme (Red Tractor, n.da), RSPCA Assured (RSPCA Assured, n.d) and the Soil Association organic accreditation (Soil Association, n.d). As concern about the welfare of the equine population increases (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Redwings, Blue Cross, World Horse Welfare, Horse World and British Horse Society (BHS), 2012 & 2013), welfare assessment across the horse population may be advocated as a means of identifying problems and targeting the resources available for improvement most effectively. As such, the equine industry may be required to engage more in welfare assessment and there have been suggestions from both within and outside the industry that assessment should become more widespread, for example through the licensing of livery yards (Owers & MacMillan, 2011).

The tools currently available for assessing the welfare of equids both at a population level and individual horse level have been reviewed by Hockenhull and Whay (2014), and recently holistic welfare assessment protocols for use by the equine industry have been developed within the Welfare Monitoring System (Wageningen UR Livestock Research, 2011) and the European Animal Welfare Indicators (AWIN) project (AWIN, n.d). In addition, on-going work, for example that being carried out in Sweden to develop a welfare assessment tool for use in horses in line with the Welfare Quality® protocols (Viksten, Nyman, Visser, &

Blockhuis, 2012) is likely to yield further protocols as another step towards promoting and supporting equine welfare assessment and improvement.

Evidence from the farming industry suggests that stakeholder attitudes to welfare assessment can vary and challenges to the implementation of welfare assessment have been identified.

Hubbard, Bourlakis, and Garrod (2007) found that UK pig farmers often felt they had no choice but to join an assurance scheme and engage in assessment to ensure they could sell their produce. Whilst many of the farmers interviewed by Hubbard et al. (2007) felt that the schemes were well organized and run, they felt negatively about the amount of paperwork that resulted through the process of auditing. Roe, Buller and Bull (2011) observed the on farm assessment process and found that few farmers looked “comfortable” whilst their farm was being assessed describing audit day as a “nervous time” for farmers, suggesting that farmers may have negative emotional reactions to the process of assessment.

The equine industry differs from the farming industry in a number of distinct ways. Firstly, whilst horses are often kept to fulfil a purpose, for example competition horses, they can also be considered a companion animal. In this sense they are neither a production animal nor a pet, but hold a dual function that is less often seen in farm or companion animal species.

Secondly, the equine industry could be considered to be much more diverse than the farming industry both in terms of the many different purposes horses have and the ways in which horses are managed. Wylie, Ireland, Collins, Verheyen, and Newman (2013a) found that horses in GB are used for a number of purposes including leisure (including hacking and hunting), competition (including dressage, show jumping, racing and endurance) and breeding. There was variation in the premises that horses were kept on and management methods including stable vs. pasture keep. As such, it could be argued that the farming industry is more uniform than the equine industry. These fundamental differences may mean that equine stakeholders differ from farmers in their perceptions of welfare assessment and

different barriers and motivating factors may exist compared to those associated with farm animal welfare assessment. The benefits of incorporating equine stakeholder perspectives into the development of equine welfare assessment approaches have been noted by Minero (2014) who describes how stakeholders were consulted about welfare indicators and barriers and solutions to the implementation of the AWIN protocol in Europe. To date no research has looked at the attitudes of equine stakeholders in GB to equine welfare assessment. Such research may be beneficial for facilitating equine welfare improvement in GB through the implementation of equine welfare assessment tools.

Focus group discussions are a form of qualitative research whereby a group of participants are brought together for the purpose of discussing an issue or idea predetermined by the researcher. The discussions are guided by a facilitator but the emphasis is on the interactions between the group members, the way they respond to and build on each other's views and the agreement and disagreement between group members (Morgan, 1997). In this way the approach differs from one to one interviews which explore individual responses. Focus groups are also a resource-effective way of gathering opinions from a range of stakeholders and are increasingly being used by researchers as a means of exploring stakeholder perceptions, attitudes and behaviors in relation to veterinary medicine and animal welfare. For example, Coyne et al. (2014) used focus groups to explore antimicrobial use and prescribing behaviors by veterinary surgeons and farmers whilst Kaler and Green (2013) explored sheep farmer opinions on the role of the veterinary surgeon in flock health management utilizing focus groups. Qualitative research methods, including focus groups, were used by Collins et al. (2012) to explore stakeholder perceptions of solutions to equine welfare problems in Ireland. The aim of this study was to explore, through the use of focus groups, equine stakeholders' perceptions of, and attitudes towards welfare assessment. Through the process of discussing approaches to welfare assessment with equine

stakeholders, it was envisaged that insight would be gained into more general attitudes and perceptions in relation to welfare assessment. The authors also aimed, by utilizing focus groups, to explore any similarities and differences in attitudes or perceptions which may exist between individuals and/or between different groups of stakeholders. This insight, it was believed, could subsequently be utilized to inform the successful implementation of welfare assessment tools within the GB equine industry.

Materials and Methods

Recruitment

Focus group participants were recruited to reflect the main stakeholder groups within the equine industry, identified by the research team as: leisure horse owners, grooms, professional riders, equine veterinary surgeons, equine welfare charity workers and equine welfare scientists. It was decided that each group should consist of people with similar roles to prevent the potential effects of power relationships within each group (See Stewart & Shamdasani 2014, p27 for discussion of social power as a consideration). Therefore six focus groups were proposed, one for each of the stakeholder groups identified above.

Recruitment was conducted using networks known to the first author and associates of the project via e-mail, telephone and social media. Snowballing techniques were also employed where participants were recruited by means of informal contact between them. This involved asking successfully recruited interviewees to nominate others known to them who might be similarly eligible (Association for Qualitative Research, n.d). As the purpose of this study was to explore the range of opinions held rather than the relative frequencies of opinions held across a representative sample of industry stakeholders this sampling strategy was deemed appropriate. The authors aimed to recruit between three and seven participants for each group

to allow a variety of views to be heard and ensure the discussions were practical to facilitate (See Stewart & Shamdasani 2014, p. 64 for discussion on focus group participant numbers). During the recruitment process potential participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and the format and logistics of the focus group discussions. Where recruitment was successful verbal permission to audio record the focus group discussions was sought. A mutually convenient time, date and location for the focus group discussion was arranged via e-mail and telephone correspondence. In accordance with University of Bristol ethical guidance all participants were sent an information sheet and consent form in advance of the meeting. The consent form was signed by participants before the focus group discussion started and guaranteed anonymity and data security and ensured written consent for the audio recording of the discussions was gained.

Focus Group Discussion Structure

Discussions were held between September and December 2013, at a variety of locations for the convenience of the participants, and lasted between two and three hours. The group sizes ranged from three to six individuals, dependent on recruitment response rates and actual attendance on the day, and a total of 25 individuals took part in the study. The focus groups were facilitated by the first author, who led the discussions ensuring that the perspectives of all participants were heard and that any emerging social influence was managed. One of the co-authors acted as note-taker. A pilot focus group was conducted independently to the main study with a group of four leisure horse owners. The participants taking part in the pilot found discussing welfare assessment approaches very difficult and it was observed that this was due to limited background knowledge about welfare assessment on the part of the participants. As a result, in subsequent discussions, background information about the different approaches to welfare assessment, for example using animal based and resource based measures, was given to participants by the facilitator during the introduction to the

subsequent discussions. Following the introduction each member of the group was asked to introduce themselves and to give a brief description of their background and current role within the industry. The facilitator then led discussions in two sections. Firstly, the groups were asked to discuss freely amongst themselves the important elements that contribute to horse welfare, described to the participants as welfare needs, which should be considered when designing a welfare assessment. The different 'needs' raised were noted on a flip chart as the participants raised them and were subsequently utilized as a basis for the second section of the discussions. Here the groups were asked to reflect on their list of the different elements of welfare and to talk about how these could or should be assessed. Around the two broad topics/questions (elements of welfare and means to assess) no specific further questions were asked across the focus groups. Instead, the focus groups followed a semi-structured approach around the two topics. Follow-up questions asked by the facilitator were in direct response to the participant's comments, for example asking for a further explanation or points of clarity.

Data analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed *verbatim* and analyzed by the first author. In the first instance the transcripts were analyzed to identify the emerging themes within the individual focus groups and to look for consensus and variance of opinion within the focus groups. A second level of analysis was then carried out to identify common themes, consensus and variance between the focus groups. Analysis focused on identifying themes which were particularly pertinent to the development and implementation of a welfare assessment tool to assess the welfare of horses across the GB horse population. Having identified the key themes that emerged from the focus groups and areas where there was agreement and/or disagreement the first author discussed these with the focus group note-taker who validated these themes with reference to their notes.

168

169 **Results and Discussion**

170 *The participants*

171 The 25 participants had a wide range of experiences within the equine industry covering the
172 major disciplines including eventing, racing, show jumping, dressage, endurance and leisure
173 use. The profiles of the group participants are listed in table 1.

174 -----

175 Table 1 about here

176 -----

177

178

179

180 *Themes around welfare assessment*

181 Through analysis of the transcripts three themes emerged relating to equine stakeholders’
182 perceptions of and attitudes towards the welfare assessment of horses: 1) perceptions of the
183 purposes welfare assessments could serve, 2) the format they perceived a welfare assessment
184 should take, 3) the role of the assessor in welfare assessment. In addition to these, other areas
185 of discussion included physical, mental and “natural” components of welfare and the value of
186 using technology, for example video recording equipment, in welfare assessments.

187 One of the reasons for utilizing focus groups in this study was to explore group dynamics,
188 how the individuals in the group disagreed and/or how they came to a consensus, and the
189 transcripts were analyzed to look for these features. However, whilst there were some

differences between the groups, discussed in the following sections, in general there was consensus within the groups and this is reflected in the presented analysis.

In the following sections the three main themes that emerged are expanded on using supporting quotes from the focus group participants to illustrate and discuss these themes in relation to the current understanding of welfare and its assessment.

The Purpose of a Welfare Assessment

Some of the participants showed an awareness of structures in place within the industry to monitor and support welfare standards and reference was made to the Codes of Practice published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra, 2013) and to local authority riding school inspections. They were also aware of organizations involved in promoting welfare standards. In the extract below, one of the leisure horse owners discusses the British Horse Society (BHS), a UK based charity that promotes horse welfare and provides industry recognized training to those responsible for caring for horses and training horses and riders, and its role in supporting welfare standards. They go on to suggest how alternative approaches may be beneficial:

I think to some degree it goes back to what the BHS says, because [according] to BHS standards, should I have my horse? Maybe to go to a more all-encompassing perspective of things, maybe you want not to have the stigma of the BHS, and a much more everyday person welfare sort of thing.....Use them as a frame, like their sort of ideas, but without the stigma and judgement. (Leisure horse owner)

Existing structures were sometimes negatively perceived and there was also a perception that welfare assessment would be viewed negatively within the wider equine population. As one of the grooms stated in relation to the attitudes of those that may be assessed:

People are going to have a perception that you are there to find things wrong.(Groom)

216 One of the reasons the participants believed that welfare assessment would be viewed
217 negatively within in the industry may be that they themselves interpreted the concept of
218 welfare in a negative way and one of the grooms pointed out:

219 *When you think of horse welfare, your immediate thought is RSPCA, or....various*
220 *charities.....because welfare is always used in that context. You never see the stories*
221 *about horses that have excellent welfare, because nobody reads about that.” (Groom)*
222

223 On only one occasion was welfare assessment discussed as a means of specifically
224 identifying and rewarding good practice:

225 *I suppose you could have encouragement....you could say, this yard is [named*
226 *facilitator] approved.....you create a sort of idea and a sort of package, that people*
227 *could openly sign themselves up to and say ‘look, I meet this standard. I’m amazing.*
228 *Come to my yard.’ (Leisure horse owner)*
229

230 For those involved in enforcing welfare legislation, the primary purpose of the welfare
231 assessments that they carry out is to determine whether welfare laws have been broken or to
232 serve improvement notices to individual owners. For them, discussing welfare assessment for
233 a different purpose was difficult, supported by the following quote:

234 *I think from your point of view, from what you're trying to do here is, it's quite*
235 *difficult for us. Because all of us only deal with that situation where it's a welfare*
236 *problem and that's why we're phoned. All we have to do is why it's a welfare problem*
237 *and what needs to be done about it. (Welfare charity worker)*
238

239 It is perhaps unsurprising that those involved with welfare legislation reinforcement
240 understand welfare assessment as a tool for identifying poor welfare. However, findings
241 from this current study suggest that this interpretation may be evident in the wider equine
242 industry.

243 Serpell (2004) and Jones (1997) have both discussed the role of the media in influencing
244 stakeholders’ perceptions and attitudes towards welfare. Media representations of welfare
245 and its assessment often focus on extreme cases of abuse and neglect and for many equine

stakeholders the only way they may see examples of equine welfare assessment is through media representations and personal observation of welfare legislation enforcement (Horseman et al., in press). Welfare assessment for the purpose of reward is relatively unheard of in the GB equine industry. Where assessments do take place this is often for the purposes of licensing, for example riding schools and racing training yards. Here passing means that the license is given or renewed rather than a pass offering a reward per se and as such the theoretical threat of not receiving the license may result in negative associations. One exception to this is the British Horse Society (BHS) approval system that offers livery yards, riding schools and holiday riding centers the chance to be BHS approved with two additional grades of commended and highly commended also awarded (BHS, n.d). One of the aims of the AWIN horse welfare assessment protocol is to ‘to highlight positive conditions’ (AWIN, 2015). However, the current research suggests that the protocol is currently not widely recognized within the GB equine industry. In contrast, the GB farming industry have greater experience of welfare assessment as a means of promoting and rewarding higher welfare standards through a range of “opt in” certification schemes offering different levels of welfare assurance. Even so, some farmers still view the assessment process negatively, perhaps because in many instances farmers are unable to access markets for their produce without “opting in” (Hubbard et al., 2007) and because participation in the schemes may be costly. Understanding the pre-existing negative associations within the equine industry towards welfare assessment, and working with the industry to address concerns and alter perceptions may improve acceptance of compulsory assessment and may also encourage voluntary uptake of welfare assessment within the industry.

Within the field of welfare science welfare assessment serves several purposes including identifying welfare problems, carrying out population level surveillance of welfare and identifying risk factors leading to welfare problems (Whay, 2007) with the ultimate aim of

271 facilitating long term welfare improvement. In this study it was found that the value of
272 collecting population data about the care, management and welfare of horses in GB was
273 doubted by some participants. For example, in discussion with the professional riders, the
274 facilitator described how welfare assessments could be carried out with no immediate
275 feedback being given to the horse owner to which one participant responded “*What’s the*
276 *point of it, then?*” The facilitator then discussed the prospect that “results” from the
277 assessments could be collated to inform our understanding of the current welfare status of the
278 equine population, to which another participant responded “*There would be no point in doing*
279 *it.*”

280 One of the reasons for doubting the value of welfare assessment for the purposes of data
281 collection may have been that many of the participants believed they knew what the main
282 welfare concerns were and the contexts in which poor welfare was occurring. As one of the
283 professional riders stated:

284 *Your happy hacker, keep one in the garden, having had four lessons at the local*
285 *riding school, doing it with the horse in one hand and the book in the other. That is*
286 *where you’re going to find most of the abuse. (Professional rider)*

287

288 From this stand point of assumed knowledge, it is easy to see how a welfare assessment
289 protocol for gathering information may not be perceived as worthwhile and demonstrates that
290 equine stakeholders believe the current understanding of the welfare status of horses in GB to
291 be adequate. Research in the field of equine welfare has provided some insight into the
292 welfare problems facing GB horses. For example Wylie, Collins, Verheyen, and Newton
293 (2013b) reported on the prevalence of laminitis within the horse population, whilst Mullan,
294 Szmargd, Hotchkiss, and Whay (2014) investigated the welfare of tethered and free-ranging
295 horses on common land in South Wales. To date there has been limited surveillance across
296 the horse population that also considers the many different facets of welfare. There is

297 therefore limited information of the prevalence of welfare problems across the industry
298 reducing our ability to target welfare improvement. This knowledge deficit was either not
299 acknowledged, or seen as important, by most of the participants in this study, the majority of
300 whom showed confidence in their perceptions.

301 One of the roles welfare assessment can have is to either validate or challenge existing
302 stakeholder perceptions. Mullan et al. (2014) describe how tethering of horses is an “emotive
303 subject” within the UK, a practice which the RSPCA refers to as being unsuitable “for the
304 long term management of an animal”. Mullan et al.’s study (2014) showed that some aspects
305 of welfare may be compromised through the practice of tethering horses: in only 16.5% of
306 observations were tethered horses seen to have access to shelter, putting them at risk of
307 compromised welfare in inclement weather. However, the observed tethered horses showed a
308 similar behavioral repertoire to free-ranging horses and showed more positive reactions to the
309 observer during an approach test than free-ranging horses. Severe physical welfare problems
310 were only infrequently seen in both the tethered and free-ranging horses. The findings
311 suggest that the welfare consequences of specific management practices may differ from
312 stakeholders’ perceptions of the effects.

313 Some of our participants felt that industry wide assessment may highlight welfare concerns
314 which may be difficult for the industry to address:

315 *But I think you have to be careful, there is a whole..... commercial side, competition*
316 *etc., and much of how they operate couldn't happen if you introduce this same style of*
317 *requirements for every horse in the country....The Household Cavalry in London, for*
318 *example, couldn't be kept the way that they are.....Or the racehorses that are kept*
319 *stabled constantly, apart from the hour and a half when they're out on exercise. They*
320 *couldn't do that, and the dressage horses and the show jumpers, you know, the elite*
321 *performers. (Welfare scientist)*

322

323 This may have been another reason why some groups did not discuss welfare assessment as a
324 means of collecting data. As demonstrated in the quote above, some of the participants

325 recognized that welfare assessment could have purposes beyond that of welfare legislation
326 enforcement. However, they sometimes articulated that broader assessment posed a “threat”
327 to the industry, for example by challenging “common” practices. As articulated in the above
328 quote, and supported by the literature, some horses in GB may be stabled constantly (see for
329 example Wylie et al., 2013a), directly contradicting their “natural” behavioral needs (Kiley-
330 Worthington, 1997). Horseman et al. (in press) discuss how some welfare compromises are
331 either normalized and/or seen as difficult to overcome and that objective welfare assessment
332 across the industry may be necessary to ensure that all welfare problems are identified. The
333 findings from this current study suggest that there may be a lack of industry level
334 appreciation of this. Those interested in promoting welfare improvement across the industry
335 through objective welfare assessment may need to convince the equine industry of the value
336 of objective, population level welfare assessment and also address industry level concerns
337 about the possible ramifications of industry wide assessment sensitively.

338 It should be noted that one group, that of the welfare scientists, appeared to have a different
339 understanding of the purpose of welfare assessment to that expressed within the other focus
340 groups, reflecting their academic background in welfare science and their understanding of
341 our knowledge gaps in relation to the welfare status of GB horses. This group primarily
342 discussed welfare assessment from the stand point of collecting population level data on
343 welfare indicators and risk factors and were much more comfortable discussing welfare
344 assessment as a research tool aimed at more long term, wider welfare improvement.

345 Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, possible purposes of equine welfare assessment framed
346 discussions about other aspects of the assessment process, including the format and role of
347 the assessor.

348

349 *The format of welfare assessments*

350 Participants discussed incorporating both resource -based measures and horse- based
351 measures of health, mental well- being and the adequacy of the environment as important
352 features of a welfare assessment. In addition, considerable emphasis was put on two specific
353 aspects of the format of welfare assessments: 1) the need to assess welfare over a period of
354 time and 2) the value of incorporating dialogue with the horse owner into the assessment.

355 Many group participants discussed how the welfare status of a horse was not fixed in time
356 and how you could not determine the welfare status of an animal through one assessment:

357 *I think you have to look at things a couple of times to definitely give more of a welfare*
358 *grade....(Leisure horse owner)*

359

360 In particular, seasonal variation, emerged as an important consideration in deciding how
361 many times to carry out an assessment and when to assess. As one horse owner said:

362 *I'd say [welfare and welfare assessment is] seasonal isn't it? Going into winter,*
363 *coming out of winter, half way through summer, potentially. That kind of thing.*
364 *(Leisure horse owner)*

365

366 Many participants recognized that horses may face different challenges to their welfare across
367 the seasons, for example over grazing in the summer and muddy conditions in the winter.

368 Hockenhull and Creighton (2015), Hotchkiss, Reid, and Christley (2007) and Wylie et al.

369 (2013b) all found that a greater proportion of horses are stabled 24/7 (kept in stables 24 hours

370 a day without access to pasture) during the winter than in the summer, whilst Giles, Rands,

371 Nicol, and Harris (2014) found that prevalence of obesity in outdoor living domestic horses

372 and ponies was 27.08% at the end of winter compared to 35.41% during the summer. These

373 research findings suggest that, as noted by our participants, welfare inputs and outputs may

374 vary across the seasons and therefore a single assessment of equine welfare may be of limited

value. The existing protocols available for assessing equine welfare, for example that created as part of the AWIN project (AWIN, n.d) do not specifically consider assessment of seasonal variation of equine welfare inputs and outputs although the AWIN protocol could easily be applied at several points during the year to look for seasonal variation. Farm welfare assessment for assurance schemes are typically carried out on a once a year basis, although staggered assessments occur in some instances to account for seasonality. For example, The Red Tractor conducts assessments of dairy farms on an 18 month basis to account for seasonal variation (Red Tractor, n.db). Once a year or eighteen month welfare assessments within the farming industry may be a reflection of the need to balance practical constraints, for example time and labor limitations, with the desire to gather comprehensive and representative data. In developing tools for assessing welfare in equids, similar practical constraints may need to be taken into account but careful consideration is needed to ensure that any compromises do not result in unrepresentative data being gathered as a result of possible seasonal variation in welfare inputs and outputs.

The focus group participants also discussed other reasons why welfare may vary over time, for example, due to horse injury, illness and consequent human intervention:

In a very short space of time some horses, for example, will experience acute pain. It may even be veterinary introduced pain, dare I say, surgical pain of some sort. I mean that's a compromise to their welfare but generally speaking we say that's acceptable, we rationalize it, we say we're doing it for the horses or the ownersBut then it's when it moves on towards a more acute chronic stage, then you're really, I think, in some difficulty. (Welfare scientist)

For some stakeholders, short term compromises of welfare were seen to be justified because of the long term benefits for the animal, and the implication was that any welfare assessment should consider both the justification for the immediate welfare compromise and the long term context. In the following extract, one of the welfare charity group participants involved

402 in enforcing welfare legislation discusses how they seek to understand longitudinal features
403 of an animals' welfare when deciding whether to take any action:

404 *If somebody complained about the same horse and I have the owner standing there*
405 *with me and I say, 'Why's it underweight?' and she's got a reason for it. I don't know -*
406 *it's been in the vets for six weeks because it's had a major colic operation. 'It's the*
407 *first time it's out; we're just building it up again'. Then that's not a welfare situation,*
408 *is it? There's a reason behind it. (Welfare charity worker)*

409

410 Interestingly in the above extract the participant describes the scenario as “not a welfare
411 situation”, despite the horse exhibiting features of reduced welfare, i.e. a low body condition
412 score. Here we see how inclusion of animal based measures into welfare assessment is seen
413 to necessitate a degree of interpretation within the assessment and that talking to the owner or
414 caregiver of the animal may help with this interpretation.

415 In the current study, the need to understand the wider context and to gather information
416 reflecting more than one point in time was one reason why talking to the owner of the horse
417 or primary caregiver was seen as an important component of any equine welfare assessment.
418 As one of the welfare scientists said about horse owners:

419 *.....they can give you a lot of information and a lot of longitudinal [information].*
420 *(Welfare scientist)*

421

422 Roe et al. (2011) carried out ethnographic studies of farm animal welfare assessment and
423 found that assessors may talk to farmers about what they are seeing on farm to more fully
424 understand the situation, especially in cases where non-compliance is suspected. In one of
425 the “case studies” presented the assessor finds problems with the youngest of the pigs on the
426 farm that is being assessed. The piglets are found to be “huddling....not playing or
427 inquisitive, and appear frightened of humans”. On talking to the farmer, the assessor
428 discovers that the piglets arrived only the night before, information that the assessor views as
429 “important” and takes this into account in his reporting. In contrast, during a different

assessment, this time of a dairy farm, the cows are found to have “inexplicably poor body condition” and the farms certification is removed (Roe et al., 2011). Evidence from this current study suggests that those involved with equine welfare assessment, i.e. equine welfare charity field officers, take a similar approach, utilizing information about the wider context to inform their decisions. Roe et al. (2011) conclude that the acceptance of welfare assessments based on outcome measures lies in assessors correctly identifying areas where problems can be addressed and those which are beyond the control of the farmer and then dealing with this information “sensitively”. Based on findings from this current study, it is likely that a similar approach to equine welfare assessment will be valued by equine stakeholders, although clearly care needs to be taken to ensure that welfare problems are not overlooked. This approach may also help to address existing defensive attitudes towards welfare assessment, and in the following extracts, participants from our current study discuss how talking to horse owners may facilitate a fair assessment:

You need to discuss the behavior with the owner. Because it might be quiet; some horses will quite happily take your head off as you walk down the stairs. Well, that's just the way they are. It doesn't necessarily mean there's something wrong with them. It doesn't mean that it's distressed, it's just a miserable git. You get horses like that.
(Welfare charity worker)

My mare, she had ulcers previously, so she is renowned for going to kick at her stomach, as a learnt thing. She is getting better and better, but it's still there. So if you put the saddle on and she goes and kicks up, are you going to automatically, as a welfare thing, go, 'Even though the saddle looks okay, there's clearly a welfare thing because the horse kicked up,' even if I say, 'It's because she had ulcers'. Do you believe me...? (Leisure horse owner)

The desire on the part of the horse owner above to “explain” their horses’ current behavior emphasizes the perceptions of welfare assessment as some form of judgement. The quote above also demonstrates a perception held by many participants that if a horse has always behaved in a particular way, or exhibited particular physical characteristics, then these may

not be indicators of a current welfare problem. Certainly in some circumstances long term features, in particular, long term behaviors may not be a reflection of current welfare status and behaviors may be learnt and emancipated from their original cause. Hothersall and Casey (2012) state that behaviors in horses caused by pain may continue after the resolution of the pain because horses learn to avoid situations where there is a risk that they will experience pain. They therefore do not learn that the situation is no longer pain inducing. As our participants articulated, talking to the owners may well elicit valuable information that may help assessors determine whether what they see reflects a current or past welfare problem for the animal, thus facilitating the welfare assessment process. It may also help to reassure owners and caregivers that the welfare of their horses is being fairly assessed. However, care should be taken as research has shown that caregivers do not always accurately assess the welfare of the horses in their care (Ireland et al., 2012, Lesimple and Hausberger, 2014) and this was noted in the current study. Whilst many stakeholders viewed owners as a valuable source of information they also saw possible problems in gathering information via owners. In particular, they saw that there was the potential for owners to try and deceive the assessors and for this reason cross validation of owner provided data was seen to be beneficial:

You've got to assess what you see, and then assess what the owner tells you, so you've got two assessments, effectively. Going back to being completely cynical, you've got to determine that what the owner is telling you is correct as you understand it...(Groom)

It is interesting to note that the participants in this current study discussed two important features, that of longitudinal enquiry and incorporation of owner perspectives, that do not appear in the AWIN horse welfare assessment protocol (AWIN, 2015). As equine welfare assessment processes develop, consideration should be given to how to incorporate what are

486 perceived to be very important features of equine welfare assessment in a way that is both
487 practical and rigorous.

488 In the next section one final feature of the welfare assessment that our participants viewed as
489 important, that of assessor qualities, is discussed.

490 *The Assessor*

491 All but one group (the welfare scientists) discussed qualities of the assessor as an important
492 feature of the welfare assessment and the assessor was seen to need to be suitably qualified.

493 One owner stated, if someone asked to assess their horses, they might ask:

494 *what actually qualifies you to decide that my horse is being correctly looked after, or*
495 *what you consider correctly looked after? (Leisure horse owner)*

496

497 “Qualified” was seen in two distinct ways. Firstly, as a manifestation of formal skills an
498 assessor could or should have and one veterinary surgeon questioned:

499 *Is the welfare assessor competent to make an orthopedic assessment of a horse? Most*
500 *of them will not be specialists in that sense. (Veterinary surgeon)*

501

502 Secondly, experience and knowledge emerged as an important quality of the assessor and as
503 this participant in the welfare charity group stated:

504 *[welfare assessment] comes down to experience because I don't think a novice can do*
505 *it properly. I think you need the knowledge of the animal, you need the knowledge of*
506 *being able to read people, and you need the knowledge to be able to interpret what*
507 *you see. Once you've got that then you can really assess. Without those three pieces*
508 *of knowledge you're going to struggle. (Welfare charity worker)*

509

510 Where welfare assessments are carried out for research purposes considerable effort is put
511 into ensuring inter and intra observer reliability in relation to the measures being taken. From
512 a welfare science perspective, this has as much, if not more to do with the “quality” of the
513 measures and scoring criteria, than attributes of the assessors. Mullan, Edwards, Butterworth,

514 Whay, and Main (2011) found that when animal welfare assessors were provided with
515 training in relation to assessing outcome measures their assessment was not confounded by
516 their attitudes to farm animal welfare. It is perhaps because of this fundamental
517 understanding of how existing welfare assessment measures have been devised that the
518 welfare scientists did not put any emphasis on assessor characteristics in contrast to other
519 groups.

520 One reason for emphasizing assessor qualities was that for many participants, welfare
521 assessment involved, at least in part, a subjective, preliminary judgement of the environment,
522 owner and horse on the part of the assessor. As one of the welfare charity participants, who
523 was involved in welfare legislation enforcement, said of their own approaches to assessment:

524 *Normally on a welfare concern, within five minutes of driving on the yard and*
525 *speaking to the owners without seeing any of the horses, you get a picture in your*
526 *brain of what you're going to see. (Welfare charity worker)*

527

528 For some, utilizing this initial instinct was seen as a means of “short cutting” the need to
529 collect large amounts of data and could help to focus the assessment:

530 *When you go and look at a yard, you walk in, and you instinctively know whether*
531 *you're going to like it or not. You do make a quick judgement, and maybe it's more*
532 *that, than necessarily the horse. Then going from your judgement, it's then when you*
533 *start asking questions, and depending on what they say, or how little, how much, you*
534 *can then go, 'My instinct was clearly completely wrong, but maybe I should keep an*
535 *eye on that place. Or, my instinct was completely right'. (Groom)*

536

537 The role of “first impressions” in welfare assessment has also been noted by Roe et al. (2011)
538 who state that “the assessment begins immediately the car pulls up” and that “impressions are
539 a powerful component of the assessment process”.

540 Utilizing intuition or instinct within welfare assessments can be considered a largely heuristic
541 approach and may be used in assessments because the alternatives are either seen to be

impossible or impractical, for example due to time constraints. Supporting this, one reason why many of the group participants emphasized assessor qualities was that they perceived that without an experienced, knowledgeable assessor, completing a welfare assessment would be hugely time consuming, especially if the protocol was designed to be used across a complex and diverse industry:

If you're producing statsthen you will want to know which headings things fit into. The only way of doing that is possibly by having a form that covers everything. Which is going to be - that would be a book. (Welfare charity worker)

One of the major challenges presented to those developing protocols for farm animal welfare assessment has been designing protocols which are both comprehensive and time efficient (Andreasen, Wemelsfelder, Sandoe, & Forkman 2013). Roe et al. (2011) describe some of the skills that the assessors they observed were seen to have that enabled them to carry out the assessments in a time efficient manner including “skilled observation of animals in different postures”, “skim reading” and “familiarity with the tick-box form”. Those involved with developing and implementing welfare assessment protocols for the equine industry are likely to also need to balance the need for comprehensive and valid welfare assessments with practical considerations including time constraints.

It should be noted that whilst utilizing the instincts of the assessor was seen as important by our focus group participants, they also discussed potential difficulties with relying on this approach:

It's difficult to quantify...a gut instinct..... people are different, aren't they? I could walk into a place and have no instinct at all, but you could, and vice versa. It's a very, very personal thing, and I think something like this, it needs to be consistent: you need to be able to prove that you have been consistent. (Leisure horse owner)

568 As such, where heuristic approaches are integrated into welfare assessments, by making use
569 of assessor knowledge, care should be taken to ensure that assessors are well informed and
570 that their “judgements” reflect what we know about best practice.

571

572 Finally, many participants believed that they, themselves, had the necessary knowledge to
573 make the correct subjective interpretations, as this conversation taken from the professional
574 rider focus group illustrates:

575 *Somebody comes in and gives two up [implies using the whip on the horse]....and the*
576 *horse behaves like a hooligan, slams the anchors on and you know it's being naughty*
577 *and give it two up, is that abuse? No, not in that context.... Another replies I think I*
578 *could recognize the difference. (Professional riders).*

579

580 The value of incorporating animal caregiver instincts and knowledge in monitoring welfare
581 forms the basis of a welfare assessment tool developed for use in zoos (Whitham &
582 Wielebnowski, 2009). The WelfareTrak® tool “integrates the knowledge, skills and
583 expertise of animal caregivers’ allowing them to ‘be the “voices” for the animals under their
584 care’. Within the assessment keepers have to rate between 10 and 15 items, for example
585 appetite, interactions with keepers, locomotion and social behavior, on a 5-point Likert scale
586 (poor, marginal, fair, good, and excellent). The assessment is designed to be conducted in 2-
587 3 minutes, thus using keeper intuition to allow rapid welfare assessments which can be
588 carried out regularly to monitor welfare over time (WelfareTrak®, n.d). Greater integration of
589 caregiver assessments into protocols for both farm animal and other species may be
590 beneficial and has been found to be effective at improving the welfare of working horses
591 (Reix et al., 2015). It may result in stakeholders having a less defensive attitude to welfare
592 assessment and Vaarst (2003) found that farmers felt it important that they could actively use,
593 benefit from, question and discuss both the indicators used in and results from a welfare

assessment. Where farmers felt that assessment was being carried out for the benefit of “others” they were less inclined to trust those conducting the assessment. Integrating caregiver assessments also allows longitudinal data to be collected in a more resource efficient way. As with the WelfareTrak® system, utilizing caregiver assessments offers a means whereby welfare can be monitored internally by those responsible for ensuring the welfare of domestic and/or captive animals, both facilitating a different appreciation of the role of welfare assessment whilst also, if managed carefully, promoting welfare improvement. It has been noted, for example by Lesimple and Hausberger (2014) that equine caregivers may not always make accurate assessments of the welfare of the horses in their care. As such, any welfare assessment tools developed to be used by caregivers should be designed in a way that facilitates the collection of valid data but may help equine caregivers make accurate assessments of the welfare of the horses they care for. The Animal Welfare Indicators (AWIN) project has recently designed a mobile phone app, AWINHorse, based on the welfare assessment protocol for horses (Dai et al., 2015). In addition, The Donkey Sanctuary are developing a mobile phone app for recording welfare assessment data (H.R Whay, personal communication, June 2, 2016). These provide useful tools which could be utilized by equine caregivers to help them monitor the welfare of their animals.

Notes on the methodology

As the concept of welfare is far from clear cut and can be defined and understood in a number of differing ways (Fraser, 2008), the level of agreement that occurred within the groups is surprising. It was perhaps a reflection of the group compositions and that by grouping people with similar roles the amount of difference of opinion was limited in some groups. The level of agreement within most of stakeholder groups may also be reflections of the nature of the horse industry where fitting in and doing and saying what others do and say is an important cultural feature (Birke, Hockenhull, & Creighton, 2010). Therefore whilst the

619 methodological approach seemed to achieve its goal of reducing the influence of power
620 relationships, it may also have resulted in limited debate and questioning. However, two of
621 the groups, the welfare scientists, and the veterinary surgeons, showed a lesser degree of
622 consensus in some of their discussions, although not within the themes discussed in this
623 paper. The veterinary surgeons debated whether a high body condition score was, in itself, a
624 welfare problem:

625 *Hang on, you keep on going to the future. I'm talking about at that moment. Can you*
626 *say to that lady, 'Look at what you've done to your horse. It is suffering'? The answer*
627 *is no you can't. All you can say is, 'It might suffer in the future if you're not*
628 *careful.'* (Veterinary surgeon)

629

630 Whilst within the welfare scientist group, there was debate over whether allowing horses to
631 exhibit natural behavior was a welfare need. One participant outlines “*Grazing and walking*
632 *as a behavior*”, as important welfare needs, to which another participant responds:

633 *You think [grazing and walking around is] important for [a] horses' welfare rather*
634 *than [being] stood [in a stable]?Right, okay. I don't know why that should be*
635 *but* (Welfare scientist)

636

637 Part of the process of studying equine welfare or equine health involves developing skills in
638 critically evaluating evidence. It is not surprising then, that the veterinary surgeons and
639 welfare scientists were more questioning. However, it is noteworthy that even within these
640 groups there was a large degree of agreement in relation to the main themes discussed in this
641 paper.

642 The authors aimed to recruit between three and seven participants for each focus group
643 discussion, informed by Stewart & Shamdasani (2014). The actual focus group participant
644 numbers ranged between three and five, which was within the desired range but at the lower
645 end. Despite this, the group sizes still allowed for comprehensive discussion of the topics

although it is possible that had larger groups been utilized a greater range of opinions may have been expressed.

The themes identified and discussed above were determined by the first author after comprehensive analysis of the transcripts. These themes were cross-validated by the note-taker who was present at all of the focus group discussions. However, no other member of the research team analyzed the transcripts. Whilst this is not considered a vital process when carrying out social science research the authors note that analysis by a second person may have led to additional interpretations of the transcripts.

Summary and Conclusions

This study has shown that the purpose a welfare assessment could or does serve within the equine industry is understood in limited and often negative terms by equine stakeholders. As such, careful consideration needs to be taken about the framing and language used when developing and implementing welfare assessments for use within the industry. Stakeholders have assumed knowledge about what the main welfare problems are and where these may occur. Industry wide assessment may be necessary to validate, address or challenge these assumptions to ensure the recognition of all welfare problems, even those that are common and/or perceived as normal. However, there may be a need to increase industry level understanding of the need and value of assessing welfare across the industry and consideration of industry level concerns should be appreciated.

The need for longitudinal data emerged as an important feature of assessing the welfare of horses both because of seasonal variation in management and welfare and because it will assist in making fair and accurate assessments. There is a need to consider how to balance this with practical constraints.

Horse owners may provide valuable information which can contribute to welfare assessments and owners may be well placed to monitor the welfare of their own horses, especially considering the need for longitudinal data. Encouraging owners to carry out welfare assessments themselves may help overcome defensive attitudes to welfare assessment and may support integration of assessor intuition into the assessment process. However, there may be some problems associated with this approach, for example if owner intuition is misguided, uninformed or biased by their relationship with their animals. Consideration should be made of how best to overcome these potential difficulties, for example by providing caregivers tools to objectively assess equine welfare.

There is evidence that whilst differences may exist between the farming and equine industry similar challenges associated with welfare assessment may also exist. As developments are made in the field of welfare assessment there is likely to be value in sharing and learning from experiences across the species to continually improve the process.

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Group	Participant profiles
Grooms	Freelance groom x2 , working on a self-employed basis in a number of settings including competition yards and livery yards Event groom working for an international event rider Riding school groom , working at a large commercial riding school Racing yard groom , with 17 year experience working on racing yards
Leisure horse owners	Leisure horse owner with two horses kept at a livery yard ¹ , one of which was retired Leisure horse loaner ² who loaned a horse kept at a livery yard Leisure horse owner with one horse kept at a livery yard Leisure horse owner with two horses kept on their own land, one retired. Was running a livery yard ¹
Professional riders	International show horse rider and show judge who had judged at county events and the Horse of the Year Show in the UK and at shows abroad Event rider , competing up to 4 star ³ Dressage rider , competing internationally up to Grand Prix level ⁴ Show jumper who was competing in show jumping and was also a British Showjumping coach
Welfare scientists	Research Fellow with experience developing welfare assessment protocols for horses. Also a veterinary surgeon. Research Associate with a PhD in equine behavior Veterinary surgeon with a PhD in equine welfare Researcher working for a UK based equine charity with a PhD in working equid welfare assessment. Also a veterinary surgeon.
Welfare charity workers	Local authority inspector , retired and currently supporting work to develop an equine welfare assessment qualification and assisting police forces making equine welfare prosecutions. Field officer for an equine welfare charity x 2. One was previously in the army Local authority worker , health and welfare enforcer who had previously worked on an equine welfare research project Equine welfare charity founder Equine welfare charity volunteer
Veterinary surgeons	Clinician , lecturer, columnist and endurance racing veterinary surgeon Clinician , FEI ⁵ veterinary surgeon (endurance and eventing) Clinician , associate at a large equine specialist referral unit

¹ A livery yard is an establishment where people can rent a stable and pasture and in some instances receive help caring for their horse in return for a fee.

² A person may borrow, sometimes at cost, a horse from another horse owner and as such is said to have a horse on loan.

³ 4 star is the highest level a horse and rider can compete at in eventing

⁴ Grand Prix is the highest level a horse and rider can compete at in dressage

⁵ FEI is the Fédération Equestre Internationale, the governing body for all Olympic equestrian disciplines.

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